

# Community Engagement Project Manual

GSFR 707: Knowledge in Action  
McMaster University  
2015-16

This manual is intended to provide students, mentors, and academic supervisors with information and guidelines relevant to GSFR 707 community engagement projects.

## Introduction

Feminists have long engaged the dialectic between theory and experience, recognizing and interrogating the role of experience in surfacing questions for theoretical analysis and situated knowledge. At the same time, feminism has included in its self-definition a commitment to praxis that reverses the structural impediments to social equality. GSFR 707 engages both of these themes through text-based research and social justice oriented community engagement projects.

## Course Objectives

*Goals for this course:*

1. To assist students in understanding feminist interventions in debates over the epistemic status of experience and its relation to theory;
2. To assist students in understanding theories of advocacy, social activism, and experiential learning as they intersect with feminist commitments to praxis;
3. To assist students in understanding feminist interventions in the dominant paradigms of community-engaged learning, as well as the challenges associated with building alliances and solidarity across difference in feminist struggles;
4. To introduce students to a variety of advocates/activists in the local community and to create opportunities to learn about local approaches to knowledge-building, activism and advocacy;
5. To provide experiential and collaborative learning opportunities that will allow students to begin to develop practical skills in community-based research, advocacy and activism and to reflect on these skills in conjunction with their community mentors and instructor;
6. To provide a range of written and oral assignments that will help students develop skills in communication and in integrating theory with practice through critical self-reflection.

*In this course, students will:*

1. Demonstrate fluency with published research on experiential knowledge, 'community engagement,' advocacy, and activism, particularly through the lens of feminist, women's, and gender studies;
2. Develop the ability to summarize, analyze, and synthesize theoretical texts;
3. Engage in critical discussion of key texts in seminar discussion and through written work;
4. Contribute to direction and quality of discussion in seminar and learning team meetings;
5. Explore and establish a code of ethics for community-based learning;
6. Undertake a CE project under the supervision of a community-based mentor;
7. Help to mentor fellow students, particularly fellow members of learning teams, by fostering a supportive and engaged environment for experiential learning;
8. Practice the integration of theory with practice through written work that involves critical self-reflection;

9. Develop and exercise skills in presenting idea orally through a collaboratively designed and executed presentation by the learning team at the end of the course.

### **Additional Project-Specific Goals**

Community engagement projects, undertaken in learning teams, will allow students to:

1. Enrich their understanding of the relation between theory and practice;
2. Interrogate their understanding of feminist knowledge;
3. Study the role of self-understanding and critical reflexivity in feminist praxis;
4. Enrich their understanding of the ethics and politics of activism and advocacy;
5. Develop skills of communication and team-work across different life paths;
6. Benefit from diverse mentoring;
7. Contribute meaningfully to the work and goals of a local feminist/social justice organization, committee or project.

### **Mentor Responsibilities**

Mentors will:

1. represent the agency/organization or committee in proposing a project or set of possible projects;
2. where possible, attend the introductory meeting of students, mentors and instructors on September 23 and the wrap-up celebration of CE projects in early April;
3. orient the student learning team to the organization/agency or committee's mandate, principles, and practices, and, where relevant, the organization's physical space and staff members;
4. work with the student learning team in October to finalize the goals and objectives of the project;
5. ensure to the best of their ability that conditions for meeting the objectives of the project can be met;
6. schedule and attend meetings every two weeks with the student learning team between early October and mid March (except for during the winter break, Dec. 14 - Jan. 6);
7. be available regularly for brief feedback, suggestions, consultation, and/or support between meetings with the student learning team;
8. at the conclusion of the projects, provide the academic supervisor with brief narrative evaluations of the students' contributions to scheduled meetings and to the project as a whole.

### **Student Responsibilities**

Students undertaking community engagement projects will:

1. work with mentors to finalize project goals and objectives;
2. collaboratively devise project outlines with fellow members of their learning team, incorporating feedback from their mentor(s) and the course instructor;
3. schedule and attend meetings every two weeks with their mentor(s) and learning team;
4. assist in mentoring and supporting fellow student members of the learning team;
5. communicate regularly and reliably with fellow student members of the learning team and with mentors via a method and timing agreed upon by the group;
6. carry out and be accountable for assigned project tasks;
7. participate in the learning team's project for approximately 70 hours over the year.

## **Academic Supervisor Responsibilities**

The academic supervisor (course instructor) will:

1. cooperate with the Director of Gender Studies and Feminist Research and the GSFR 707 teaching team in securing appropriate project settings for students;
2. negotiate settings for the community engagement projects and determine learning teams with a view to the themes of the course, the vision, mission and values of the community organizations, the willingness and ability of the community settings to support the student learning teams, the skills and desires of students, and the educational potential of the project settings;
3. liaise with mentors and other representatives from the mentors' agencies and organizations;
4. inform students and mentors of the goals of the course and the guidelines governing the projects;
5. ensure that any legal and regulatory requirements of the projects are met;
6. arrange an initial meeting between learning teams and mentors;
7. evaluate students' participation in learning teams, with input from mentors and students;
8. monitor student progress (for example, through seminar meetings, project outline discussion meetings, ITP papers, and informal student and mentor progress reports);
9. assist in resolving difficulties or conflicts that may arise;
10. carry out the customary academic duties of teaching, consulting with, and evaluating students.

## **Project Development**

Community organizations will initially propose student projects to the academic supervisor(s), who will present the proposal(s) to the students. The final scope of the projects for particular students will be negotiated between the mentors and the student learning team members, in consultation with the academic supervisor(s). Students will meet in learning teams with mentors and prepare a written project outline describing the goals and objectives of the project, the activities to be engaged in, and the expectations for oversight. Particular attention will be given to the ethics of advocacy as undertaken in the projects.

## **Project Evaluation**

Assignment of final grades for this academic course, including the projects, is the responsibility of the academic supervisor(s). However, both the student and the community mentor will submit an assessment of the student's participation in learning team meetings with the mentor and the student's contributions toward meeting project goals.

## **Problem Resolution**

Problems during a project may be resolved informally. The academic supervisor (course instructor), fellow learning team members, and/or community mentors should be consulted when a difficulty arises. If a problem cannot be resolved informally, the academic supervisor will consult the Director of Gender Studies and Feminist Research.

## Appendices

### **A: Sexual Harassment/Anti-Discrimination in Projects**

Students have a right to learn in an environment where they feel safe and to be protected from sexual harassment and discrimination. The Gender Studies and Feminist Research Program recognizes its obligation to ensure that these rights are respected.

Two university-wide policies are in place that seek to create an environment that is safe and non-discriminatory. The **McMaster University Policy and Procedures on Sexual Harassment** (<http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/General/HR/sexharassment.pdf>) and the **McMaster University Anti-Discrimination Policy** (<http://www.mcmaster.ca/policy/General/HR/Anti-Discrimination%20policy.pdf>) apply to all members of the university community as well as to “students engaged in University-sanctioned academic activities on premises off campus” which includes community engagement projects. Students should familiarize themselves with these documents.

Any student who feels harassed or discriminated against is encouraged to discuss the situation with someone they feel they can trust. They may wish to consult the **Human Rights and Equity Office, McMaster Student Centre, Room 212, Ph: (905) 525-9140 ext.27581**. Students are encouraged to document circumstances and dates of incidents of harassment and/or discrimination, as well as its impact on them.

### **B: Infectious Diseases, Immunizations, Police Checks**

In the course of a project, a student may be exposed to an infectious disease. Both community mentors and academic supervisors have a responsibility to ensure that students are made aware of any extraordinary risks they may encounter as part of their project. Community mentors should identify any high risk situations and any agency policies and procedures to be followed in relation to them.

Students are advised to review their immunization records and if necessary update their protection. **McMaster Student Health Services, McMaster University Student Centre B101, Ph: (905) 525-9140 ext. 2770**.

The Ontario Government requires that individuals working with “vulnerable populations” undergo a police check. Depending on their projects, students may be required to obtain a current police check prior to their projects. Community agencies and organizations make the decision to accept or deny a student project on the results of a police check.

### **C: Worker’s Compensation**

All students in unpaid projects or placements in agencies registered with Workplace Safety and Insurance Board are covered by the Worker’s Compensation Act. This means that in the event of a project related injury or illness, students are eligible for benefits from WSIB. **The total cost of WSIB coverage is paid by the Ministry of Education and Training. Student injuries or illnesses will not affect the assessment rating of agencies. Students undertaking community engagement projects with agencies not covered by the WCA are provided with accident insurance by the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training at no cost to the student or agency.**